

PIN-UP

Magazine for
Architectural Entertainment
Issue 15
Fall Winter 2013/14
USD 15.00

Plus
67 pages
of Interior
Moments

Featuring
**Aranda
Lasch,
Maria Pergay,
Steven Holl,
Jon Rafman,
Herman
Hertzberger,
Konstantin
Grcic, Edgar
Allan Poe and
more...**

ISSN 1933-9755



9 771933 975000

MARIA PERGAY



Interview by
Jina Khayyer

Portraits by
Katja Rahlwes

It's 5:00 p.m. on a Wednesday afternoon at the Hôtel Lutétia in Paris. Maria Pergay walks through the lobby as if it were her home, each of her steps determined. She chooses an armchair and asks for an extra cushion, to sit higher, more upright. While most of the regular Lutétia crowd is sipping tea and eating cake, Madame Pergay (she prefers simply Maria) asks for a Diet Coke, with "plenty of ice and extra lemon, *s'il vous plaît*." She is not tall but strong. Her voice is warm, and she speaks quickly and precisely. No sign of her being 83 years old. To sum up her life and career in a few words would be impossible, but here's a quick attempt: born in 1930, to Russian parents, Maria spent part of her childhood in what is now Moldova. When her father, a Russian spy, was arrested and sent to the gulag, she and her mother escaped to France, where relatives took them in. After the war, Maria studied costume design and sculpture at Paris's Institut des Hautes Études Cinématographiques, where she met her future husband, Monsieur Pergay, with whom she had four children. It was as a young mother that her career began crafting beautiful objects out of sterling silver: ashtrays, cigarette boxes, little vases, which she sold at her shop in the Place des Vosges. In the 1960s she was asked to produce one of her designs in stainless steel, and so began her long love affair with this most virile of materials, with which she made her name and her fortune. Looking back now at her catalog of often iconic pieces, where steel is passionately bent, welded, and wrought into shapely submission, it's hard to believe that this utilitarian metal could have ever been considered the antithesis of bourgeois good taste. Which isn't to suggest that Pergay's creations — which grace the homes of Saudi royalty and oligarchs alike — are of conventionally good taste. Indeed Pergay isn't afraid to use elements that in the hands of lesser talent could easily take a turn towards the tacky. But under her steely direction bows, precious stones, tassels, and even fur, are transformed into pure design poetry. In recent years Pergay has stepped back into the limelight, thanks in large part to the New York gallerist Suzanne Demisch who, legend has it, tracked the retired designer down in 2003 at her daughter's home in Morocco. Since then Pergay has been working non-stop, producing seven to ten new pieces per year. When she's not working, she likes to spend as much time as possible in her country home in Béziers, in the south of France. But on this particular afternoon at the Lutétia, she was all ours.

Jina Khayyer You're rather an habituée at the Lutétia I believe. What is it you like about it?

Maria Pergay First of all it's quiet. And then it seems to me that the walls are breathing, that they've absorbed the past, the history, the ghosts of all the people that were here, the great artists... You can feel it, and I feel like I'm among them. It's a source of pride to me, albeit perhaps rather an inappropriate one! And the people who come here now have a certain patina, a certain approach towards the place and a taste for it. Nobody vulgar would ever come here.

JK Would you say it's particularly French?

MP No, it's international. The jet set came here, and before that it was the era of Coco Chanel, that whole magnificent change that happened after the First World War. And then

the Germans made it their HQ [during the Second World War] and afterwards, when the Jews came back, they arrived here. So it's a place of separations, of dramas, of people being reunited, of happiness... It's very particular.

THE INDISPUTABLE GRANDE DAME OF FRENCH COLLECTIBLE DESIGN IS ANYTHING BUT STEELY

JK Of course you yourself lived through the upheavals of those times — you're Russian by birth but at the age of six you fled with your mother to France. Do you have any Russian characteristics?

MP Passion, in all its forms. Be it a question of intimate feelings, of creativity, of family, of politics — passion! Nothing is indifferent — I cannot remain indifferent to anything.



Pergay is best known for the way she bends, welds, and wreaks stainless steel into submission. But her fascination extends to other materials as well, such as ancient stones, copper, or simply formica and wood, as in the case of this simple 1967 three-tier low table. © Thierry Depagne

JK And how would you define the French part of you?

MP Um, how shall I put it... It's the seasoning! [Laughs.]

JK In the early 1950s you went to live in New York I believe.

MP I didn't go to live there, I went to study. But I couldn't have stayed because I was already far too French by that time.

JK What do you mean by that?

MP It was very exciting, but it was also the period of McCarthyism. I was just coming out of the war and was totally "America is freedom!", I thought it would all be wonderful, but in fact it was worse... People in the street were reading the communist newspaper *Daily Worker* hidden inside another newspaper. And my neighbors, who also read it, were under police surveillance. Americans at the time were, how can I put it... they weren't aware of all that, they were more concerned about the turkey they'd bought for dinner that night, they were totally insouciant and infantile as a people. And coming out of the war, I wasn't coming from that kind of infantility but from a sort of

gravity — when you go through a war, even if you're young, it makes you rather grave.

JK Did you learn anything about taste from the Americans?

MP Uh, surprise! [Laughs.]

JK And what did you learn about taste from the French?

MP Where do you think I learned anything? — I was six years old when I arrived in France! So before the war, which I lived through here.

“TASTE CAN BE AWAKENED. AND ONCE IT'S AWAKENED, YOU CAN EDUCATE IT.”

JK Would you say that taste is something one can learn?

MP No, there's nothing you can do. I'm about as much responsible for my taste as I am for the color of my eyes! [Laughs.] But taste can be awakened though. And once it's been awakened you can educate it. You don't know what taste is if you don't have it in you, that source, that thirst. Because I look at my children, who were all brought up the same way, and two of them have inherited that and two of them haven't. Not that they're slumming it in the street of course... Tell me, do you have children?

JK Not yet. Why? Is there a connection between having children and having taste?

MP Oh yes. Somebody once said to me, “Be careful Maria, don't confuse creation and procreation.” They said that to me because I wanted to have children — they said, “Be careful, you'll smother everything, that whole little fire in you that's burning.” But actually it was the complete opposite, it made me want to do it even more... Yes, because children are to a certain extent like clay you model, but at the same time they're a mirror, the ones you love... And they're all different, there were the ones who knew right away how to hold a spoon, and then there are the ones to whom I still say today, “Listen, will you hold your spoon properly please?”!



The bow is among the recurring motifs in Pergay's work. It can be traced back to her early pieces from the 1950s, gracing trays and small silver-plated boxes. In 2007 Pergay cleverly used the motif to create a pouf, aptly titled the Pouf Ruban (ribbon pouf), which is in red enameled stainless steel.

JK And this thirst you describe, it's a thirst for what?

MP It's a necessity, you're satisfying a necessity, a necessity that provokes you. It's a question of beauty, you feel compelled to go and look, to touch, which feeds your imagination, and it's like a caress, you caress it with your eyes. And it's also a search, it's life, it's alive, and for me nothing is dead.

JK Can you describe one of the first times you felt this?

MP I arrived in France with my mother by train. It was around 1936, 1937. We came via Germany, and the train stopped

at the enormous train station in Berlin. Berlin was at its peak, Hitler was at his peak. It was a big city, the first time I saw a city of light... It wasn't Paris I saw first, it was really Berlin. My mother opened the window — it was one of those magnificent trains they had in those days — and the whole experience set off a curiosity in me that has remained. It wasn't just that everything was brilliantly lit by electricity, it was really the feeling of being... I'm going to tell you something funny, don't laugh: the feeling of being made noble by what's beautiful... When you go into certain places, certain churches or palaces, whatever, personally I don't feel intimidated, overwhelmed, but quite the reverse — I feel renewed.



Maria Pergay's first claim to fame in the late 1950s was thanks to her original, and elaborately produced, silver objects and accessories, such as boxes, champagne buckets, letter openers, and trays. They were particularly popular as corporate gifts, and Pergay accepted commissions from companies such as Christian Dior, Givenchy, Hermès, and Maison Jansen. In 1960 she opened her own boutique at 2, place des Vosges in Paris.

JK Do you remember any other moments like that, moments that changed the way you think, pushed you in a new direction?

MP Let me tell you what it was that decided the course of my life. I was four years old, I'd just had scarlet fever but was still suffering from the repercussions, and at the time there was no treatment, with 1.5 meters of snow outside the window, and no penicillin... The weather was very cold, and I was terribly bored, despite my poor grandmother who did everything she could to amuse me, and all the kids had gone outside to play on sledges but of course my mother absolutely wouldn't allow me out, and my father was too busy with his work to entertain me. He traveled a lot for his job, and sometimes he managed to get things that came from Europe... One day he brought me a little box, a painted tin, with colored pencils inside and on the outside the prow of an ocean liner. I can still see it now, red, white, and blue, and those colored pencils, I was fascinated... One doesn't read at the age of four and a half, and you mustn't forget I was living in a country where there were no books, no literature, no images. We lived without images, and perhaps that's where my great thirst comes from... So my father brought me this box, and then mother came home that evening, I can still remember it like a film, she took off her gray coat, and I was looking at the pencils, I could see that they would make color, but I didn't dare touch them. And *maman* went to get a piece of writing paper,

and out of nothing she drew a small cube, in this little cube there's a small door, then there's a window with shutters, two little flowerpots, a roof, bricks, a chimney... Everything started there. And after that I did one house, two houses, 300 houses, 1,000 houses — I'm talking about those I've worked on over my career, but also all the drawings I've made...

JK With all this passion and sensibility in you, as well as your being a mother of four, how did you end up bringing the coldest, most masculine of all materials into the domestic sphere. Why did you design in steel?

MP I had a score to settle with Mr. Stalin. You know his name means steel? So the more I hit it the happier I am!

JK [Laughs.] But seriously, your career took off in the 60s because of your Flying Carpet daybed made out of stainless steel. How did you start working with this material? Indeed how did your career start?

MP Well it started because we needed money, we had four children, it was after the war, things were difficult, and I wasn't working at the time. One day a friend came to see me, and she said, "You wouldn't happen to know anyone who could help me with window dressing?" And for me it was as though someone had rung a bell! And so I started out doing shop windows, it was such fun! No one had thought of doing windows the way I did them! And I began to be very attracted by silver, and I started making small silver objects, rather exceptional things, for the window displays. And one day someone came to see me and said, "You wouldn't have an idea for a cup for a hunting meet?" And I decided to do a sort of champagne bucket, like an animal skin turned inside out, in silver. No one had done that, hunting cups were always these things with handles and animals. And that's how it started, I had an avalanche of interest, people in Paris were starting to have money again, and wanted gifts in silver... Later I had my own shop, in the Place des Vosges, and one day a gentleman came in and said, "Madame, I'm from Ugine-Gueugnon" — do you know who they are? They make stainless steel, a brand called Uginox — "and we'd like you to make client gifts for us. You know, your large flat box, with the belt on it and everything, we'd very much like to offer those to our clients. But would you be able to make it in steel, because we sell steel — it would make for a very handsome advertising object."



The six-and-a-half-foot wide Cabinet Jardin Secret from 2012 incorporates glass-enclosed tree branches and leaves, all made of bronze. Photo courtesy Demisch Danant.

JK And that's how it started with the steel...

MP Yes. But you know, when I had the idea for furniture in steel, the head of Uginox said to me, "Madame, it's all very delightful, you're very delightful, but we've made our enquiries to find out if people would accept furniture made of steel, we thought of it before you, and everyone says no." So I said, "Why? Have they seen what's in my head?"

How could they? They don't know what I'm going to do." And they nonetheless made funds available so I could do it, and afterwards I made furniture for them. For a year, or maybe even 18 months, they took out a half page in *France Soir*, an advertisement which said, "Steel isn't always keys, the kitchen, saucepans..." It was extraordinary, I really was the first!



Pergay's first collection of stainless steel furniture for Uginox was sold at Galerie Maison et Jardin on Boulevard Saint-Germain in Paris, where it was presented in combination with antiques and Old Master paintings. All the pieces in the first exhibition in 1968, including the Bureau S (1968), were acquired in their entirety by Pierre Cardin. Photo courtesy Demisch Danant.

JK In the 70s you even made a canopy bed in stainless steel for the Empress of Iran.

MP Yes, that was amazing. She loved her bed so much. I got a lot of attention because of it.

JK How do you manage to tame steel as if it were butter?

MP Well I speak to it very sweetly! [Laughs.] *Voilà!* But today you can have steel just as you want it, or almost, they know how to work it.

JK How big is your atelier?

MP I have an office, two secretaries, there's me and my son, but I don't have an atelier. Why? Because each piece I make requires special tools and machinery. There's everything that's in steel, everything that's in iron, in copper, there's the polishing, the shaping, the presses, and so on. You understand?

JK And you produce everything in France?

MP Absolutely. I have several workshops that work for me. There are all the cabinetmakers, there's the carpenter, there's the metalworker, there's the person who polishes the metal, another one who does laser cutting. I couldn't possibly have my own atelier. I would have to be very, very rich!

JK Let's go back to 1977, which was an important year in your career: you were hired by the royal family in Saudi Arabia to decorate several palaces. How did that happen?

MP I met a team of architects who were working in Saudi Arabia, and they said, "Look, we need an interior designer fast, we need an outline project for his majesty who's going to marry four girls." So I created a series of small buildings, in Taïf.

JK What was it like as a woman working in a country where women have no rights?

MP But I wasn't considered a woman. I was working, I wore

long skirts, or pants, and I was always accompanied, either by my son or by people who were working on the building sites. I had a visa from his majesty and I was working for his majesty. So I was very much persona grata.

JK Did you learn any Arabic?

MP No. A few everyday expressions. I understood a little bit and could ask for directions.

“MY MAIN RUSSIAN CHARACTERISTIC IS PASSION. I CANNOT REMAIN INDIFFERENT TO ANYTHING.”

JK Do you still speak Russian?

MP Of course, fluently. It's my mother tongue. I speak it as well as I speak French — to the extent that I speak French well!

JK What are your feelings about Russian taste today?

MP That which hasn't been impregnated, demolished, or, how might I say, hidden, hasn't had time to be reborn, to rise from its ashes. For me, Russia suffers from the same disease as just about all Russians, by which I mean space — nothing can be too big or too beautiful, nothing is too much... There's a sort of sublimation in the work and in taste. And too bad if the neighbors don't like it, that's for sure!

JK Could you talk about your recent collaboration with Fendi during AD Intérieurs? The result was really quite extraordinary — what was the brief?

MP The theme was metamorphosis — everything I adore! I had a Louis Quinze writing desk smash its way through a crate, to show how beautiful Louis Quinze furniture is, how magnificent, the superb craftsmanship. And there's this Louis Quinze sculpture of a woman on the desk — a writing desk that Louis XV himself must have leant on, it's a desk that was at Versailles — and this sculpture of a mermaid is escaping from there, she wants to see the daylight again — it's magnificent, there's so much poetry in it.



In 1960 Pergay was hired by the French decorating house Maison Jansen to design the bathroom of the Tunisian first lady. Pergay used rose marble for the walls and emerald green tiles for the floors and the sunken bathtub. But the highlight was the figurative gilt-bronze swan-shaped bathtub faucets.

JK And what about the Lion Chair?

MP Ah yes, the Lion Chair, it's very strong. Did you touch it? When you're sitting in the chair, there's only one armrest, while the chair itself is in straw... And straw is such a magnificent material, it's eternal, it's sand, it's silica...

So there's marquetry in straw that represents the skin of a leopard. And there is a metamorphosis of the skin: you go from the straw, which feels like silk, to the armrest, which is in steel, but covered in real fur, and then to rest your hand there's a little knob in gilded bronze... I like playing with all of that, I don't know what I'll do next time...

JK One of my favorite Maria Pergay pieces is the tortoiseshell sofa you made for Pierre Cardin in 1977. Salvador Dali must have envied you that sofa! Did you ever meet him?

MP I worked for him! He asked me to do a project. He was a very great painter and draughtsman, but he wasn't a sculptor or modeler. He'd given as a theme — there were several of us, several silversmiths — something around the idea of a flame. And I decided to do the myth of the flame; the myth of the flame was a moth, worked in gold, and all you saw was the skeleton of the moth — can you imagine, the skeleton of a moth, have you ever seen such a thing? But what was particularly delicate was the ashes, if I might call them that. You could see all the grooves of the moth's members, etc., which held gemstones, you know like rhodochrosites, special stones, which were prisoners like the colors of the moth. It was beautiful, and too funny.



The 1968 Chaise Anneau (or Ring Chair), made from three rings of stainless steel, is perhaps Maria Pergay's most iconic design. Only 50 were produced and very few are available today, fetching prices of up to 70,000 dollars. Photo courtesy Demisch Danant.

JK You've been creating for almost 60 years. Of the hundreds of pieces you've made, do you have a favorite one?

MP No, I don't think so. You know, it's like the Lebanese proverb, the last person you love is the baby until he's grown up, the child until he becomes a man, and the person who is absent until he comes back... But each piece allowed me to move forward in some way or other. I'm not interested if the piece doesn't bring me something extra or allow me to evolve. Every time I've touched a piece of steel it was an ordeal, a trial, or a proof.

PLATES — pages 78–79, 82–83

1 Pergay's Chaise Lion (2013) was specially created for her Fendi-sponsored installation at the 2013 AD Intérieurs in Paris.

2 Cubes Cassés (2008) are two side tables made of stainless steel and snake wood. They're fitted with interior LED lights.













